

# Making and breaking

Children searching for guides to making Christmas cards or presents will not have much success with Professor Branestawm's **Do-it-Yourself Handbook** (Bodley Head, £2.50) by Norman Hunter, but they will get a lot of fun from the very simple flying saucers and tins-that-do-as-you-say at the start of the book and can progress through wilder and wilder excesses as the mad Professor leads them farther away from convention. Jill McDonald's illustrations match the author's wit and make even the most complicated models seem easy.

The **First Puffin's Pleasure** (Puffin, £1.50) should not be confused with the Puffin Annuals of the past two years. Fat Puffin has taken on a more sober appearance, no doubt under the influence of economic depression, and has turned from the gay exuberance and excruciating jokes of former years. There are some "jolly good stories" and articles in this volume, but one misses the former liveliness.

For embryo secret agents Geoffrey Lamb's **Your Book of Secret Writing** (Faber, £2.30) presents an ideal introduction to cryptography in all its forms: not just number and letter codes but patterns looking like crosswords gone mad and secret inks made from readily accessible household chemicals, although that most accessible and beloved secret ink of thriller writers was missing. Could it be for reasons of hygiene, or even modesty?

For me, however, the best of the popular Christmas books is undoubtedly Alan Russell's **Record Breakers** (BBC, £1.50) based on the popular television series. This amazing jumble of incredible facts is full of fascination and humour: the transatlantic battle for the longest-singing record; the man who was struck, not once, or even twice, but six times by lightning and lived to tell the tale. Did you know that "Connie Baker . . . swung 58 hula hoops round her torso" or that the longest surname has 591 letters?

V.A.

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